3: Robequain--261 S-5 (no date) 1944 Laotians
116, 135, 316, 402, 494

"Laos ore is harder to work than Tonkinese because of its lower metal content and the presence of considerable amounts of sulphurous and ferruginous matter. In addition, coal is scarce here: producer gas gazogenes run the dynamos which produce motive power, but they consume enormous quantities of wood, which must be cut farther and farther away from the mine. As a result, the ore has never been smelted on the spot. But mechanical processes for separating and purifying have gradually been set up at the mines. For example, after crushing and magnetic separation, very well-equipped washers prepare concentrates for export. Under sloping roofs, powerful machines stand in tiers one above another on the hillsides, so that the water and the gradually purified product itself are moved as much as possible by mere gravity from one process to another. The mud and rocks, which were dumped out of small wagons at the top of the mill, appear as black cassiterite crystals at the bottom where they fill little 35 or 50 kilogram sacks for shipment to Singapore. They are transported either via the Mekong or over the roads from Thakhek and Savannakhet to the Annam coast. Six thousand Annamites work in the tin mines of the Laos basin; though a few are Tonkinese most of them come from Nghê Tinh. Work is done by gangs and goes on continuously since the machines can be stopped only at great expense; at night this isolated basin, surrounded by rugged mountains and dotted with electric lights which furnish illumination for the coolies as they work to the accompaniment of the mills' unrelenting rhythm, is a striking picture."

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
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CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROAD TO XIEN KHOUANG

494 THE struggle with the pirogue men, which I expected would become a daily routine, was suddenly broken off by news of a convoy going to Xien Khouang. And better still there was a spare seat in a car which would leave the convoy after the danger point was passed and carry on to Luang Prabang. This was a jeep belonging to a French official called Dupont, a flamboyant, red-bearded figure I had often seen hurtling through the streets of Vientiane. Dupont had been on a mission in Vientiane and was now returning to his home in Luang Prabang.

000 He arrived at the villa at about 3 a.m. next morning — a tornado approach, through the foot-deep carpet of dead leaves. Shrouded in protective clothing as the driver of an early Panhard-Levasseur he could be seen through the bare frangipani branches, tooting his horn continually, and waving his arms with excited exasperation at the thought of things he had forgotten. There was a platform built between the driver's and passenger's seats on which a dog which looked like a samoyed perched uneasily. Dupont said it was a race bred only by the Meos. In the back of the jeep a Laotian driver sat buried in luggage. He was asleep, and as we took the corners his head rolled from side to side like a freshly cut-down suicide.

So far I had met French intellectuals, soldiers, politicians, but Dupont was the man of action, although action that seemed often without motivation or relevance. He was a corsair out of his day; an adventurer who was swaggeringly going native and whose ardours Laos would tame and temper. Dupont had married a Laotian wife in Luang Prabang and said that he would never return to France. His children would probably be brought up as Buddhists, and by that time, no doubt, Dupont himself would be paying some sort of lax observance to the rites. In the meanwhile he had reached

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
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000 the point of respecting in a light-hearted way all the superstitions of East and West combined; sometimes perplexed when they were in conflict, as happens, for example, with Friday the 13th; since in Indo-China all odd days are fairly lucky, and Friday is the luckiest day of the week. He carried a Laotian sorcerer's stick, engraved with signs and symbols enabling him to cast a rapid horoscope, but was only affected by verdicts in support of decisions he had already taken. Dupont was in a great hurry to get back to Luang Prabang, because his wife was pregnant and he was afraid that she would hurt herself on her bicycle, although he had dismantled it and had
494 hidden some essential parts. We were supposed to stay in the convoy until the Xien Khouang embranchment was reached, about a hundred miles from Luang Prabang, but Dupont said that if I had no objection we would clear off on our own at the first possible opportunity. He then made some fatalistic remarks about death and predestination.

494 At the convoy assembly-point, we found a great show of discip-
722 line. Tight-lipped officers were walking up and down examining tyres and checking guns and ammunition. Drivers were assembled and lectured on convoy discipline. A soldier's Laotian wife, being observed to be pregnant, was refused permission to travel. The infantry escort was carried in five or six lorries and as many others were loaded with supplies. A dozen jeeps were placed in the middle of the convoy, which was guarded at each end by an armoured car. Dupont was turned back when he tried to bluff his way to the head of the column behind the leading armoured car, from which position he had hoped to be able to sneak away at an early opportunity

527 Although by the time we got under way it was shortly before dawn, all Vientiane was still awake. Grinding our way through the streets we passed a *boun* in full swing with its temple-dancers still trapesing round their stage, and the magnified sobbings of a crooner not quite drowned in the roar of thirty exhausts. The streets were full of torch-carrying crowds.

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
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ooo tasted of earth and bitter herbs when a commotion aroused us. Hurrying from the restaurant we saw Dupont's dog busy with carrion in a nearby field, surrounded by an excited huddle of vultures for whose benefit it had been exposed there. Dupont's cries of horror were interrupted by the whistle of the convoy-commander, who this time signalled for all officers to gather round
494 him. He told them that seventy Issaraks[1] were reported to be in
669 ambush, awaiting us at Kilometre 115 — about twenty miles further
725 on. They were turned out in new American uniforms, he said, and were well armed. At Kilometre 115 a cross-country track leading from Siam into Viet-Nam crossed our route. It occurred to both Dupont and myself that if this report was several hours old, it was not likely that the Issarak would be in the place where they were first seen. However, the official view taken was that they would not have moved more than five kilometres down the road in our direction, because orders were given for the infantry escort to dismount from their lorries at Kilometre 110 and to precede the convoy on foot for the next five kilometres. We noticed, too, that the officer assumed that the Issarak, if they had moved at all, would have inevitably marched towards us, and not in the other direction, because, once Kilometre 115 had been reached, the danger would be officially declared at an end, and the infantry ordered back into their lorries.

137 We now entered a country of low, bare hills; a whitish landscape, rarely animated by wandering pink-skinned buffaloes. In the hollows there were islands of splendid vegetation — flamboyant trees, arranged as if by design, with giant ferns and feathery bamboos. Peacocks gleamed in abandoned paddy fields, and storks, flapping away at our approach, trailed their legs in pools of yellow marsh-water. The vegetation was sensitive to quite small variations in altitude. The valley-bottoms were choked with bamboo thickets, and slender, segmented canes, wreathed in blue convolvulus, curved over our path like coachmen's whips, flicking us as we passed beneath. At this level the ditches were full of dead butterflies

[1] [i.e., "free men" of Laos and Cambodia. -- Analyst]

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM 1 Indochina
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A DRAGON APPARENT

000 Up till the last fraction of a second before a thousand graceful stems screened it from our view it was still upright and quite level. The soldiers in it had hardly risen from their seats and raised their arms not so much in alarm, it seemed, as to wave farewell.

Soon after, the infantry climbed down from the lorries and began their march in single file along the sides of the road in front. This manœuvre seemed to me not only useless but dangerous, since nothing could have been easier for ambushers than to let the soldiers go by and then destroy the defenceless vehicles. In the spirit of one who whistles in the dark to keep his courage up, the armoured car ahead occasionally opened up with its machine-guns and 2-cm. cannon, provoking, to the great discomfort of the following cars, one small forest fire. We never heard that the enemy 494 was other than imaginary. At five in the afternoon we crawled into the village of Vang Vieng, having done about twenty miles since mid-day.

133 Vang Vieng was just such another village as the one where we had had our mid-day Chinese soup, but it was set in the most staggering surroundings. Overhanging it was a range of mountains which were not very high, since the peaks only reached 8000 feet, but which did not look like any mountains I had ever seen before. There was no visual preparation by a gently rising foreground of foothills. These were stupendous walls of rock rising 4000, 5000 and 6000 feet sheer out of an absolutely flat plain. We were overhung, as it were, by a huge scrabbling in the sky, which at its base had been erased by mists. Dupont said that we would pass over these mountains that night.

494 It was at Vang Vieng that Dupont had planned to slip away. His 725 resolution was only slightly shaken when it was announced that the 6069 whole convoy would stay in the village overnight, owing to the presence of a small force of Viet-Minh, which the infantry would have to clear out, in a village fifteen kilometres further along the

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
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road; but as all the men were thoroughly tired this operation would be postponed till early next morning. Dupont was determined not to stay in Vang Vieng, but even he seemed to think twice about deliberately disobeying the convoy-commander's orders, and when he finally did so it was done in gentle stages, rather than in one flagrant act of insubordination. The excuse given for this phobia about Vang Vieng was that all the sleeping space would be taken up and we should find nowhere to stretch out comfortably.

We were still filthy from our travels; sweat-soaked and covered in bright yellow dust, through which the perspiration trickled down regular courses. As part of his campaign Dupont suggested that we should have a meal first and after that get permission from the convoy-commander to go for a bathe in a river, twelve kilometres down the road, where we should still be three kilometres short of the village with the Viet-Minh. Dupont described this river as if it had magical curative properties. It came out of a cave not far away, he said, and the water was icy cold. This course being agreed upon, we went to the usual Chinese eating-house run by one Sour Hak. Taken by surprise by our invasion, Sour Hak found himself short of food. However, as these villages are completely cut off during the six months' rainy season, there are always standbys for emergency. Reaching to the top of the cupboard he found a hunk of venison *boucané*, dusted it off and set it before us. This meat, prepared in a manner similar to that employed by the Argentine gauchos, was black, fine grained in texture as cheese, odourless and tasted slightly of liquorice. According to the usages of life in the bush, strips were cut off it with one's clasp knife. Fortunately, Sour Hak was found, quite mysteriously, to have a stock of first-rate Burgundy; doubtlessly bought in the belief that it was Algerian. Dupont's sudden optimism was only lowered by Sour Hak's refusal at any price to sell a green parakeet, which had flown in one day and attached itself to the house. Since tasting civilization nothing could persuade this bird to use its wings again, although like a true Laotian it enjoyed being taken for a ride on a bicycle. Dupont's